

Introducing Vocabulary

Ms. T's classroom, Monday morning:

Ms. T: Our first vocabulary word is *covet*. Sam, what does *covet* mean?

SAM: (*reading from the dictionary/glossary*) "To wish for greatly or with envy."

Ms. T: Okay. So, if someone has a CD, and you really wish you had it, we might say that you covet the CD. Let's look at the next word. . . .

Ms. T's classroom, Thursday morning:

MARIA: (*reading from a story*) "As much as Philip liked his new bike, he coveted his cousin's shiny scooter."

Ms. T: *Covet* is one of our vocabulary words. Who remembers what it means? Terry?

TERRY: No response.

Ms. T: Alex?

ALEX: Umm . . .

Ms. T: Alison?

ALISON: Uh, I think, like making a wish. He made a wish to get a scooter, but his parents got him a bike instead.

The above exchange typifies events that sometimes occur in relation to vocabulary instruction. Although a word's definition is explicitly provided, students often do not recall it several days later, or what is recalled is a somewhat misleading interpretation of the word's meaning. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss reasons that this might occur and to present ways to make vocabulary introduction more effective.

INTRODUCING WORDS IS THE FIRST STEP

The title of this chapter is *introducing* vocabulary to make the point that providing word-meaning information is only a first step in building word knowledge. Just providing information—even rich, meaningful explanations—will not result in deep or sustained knowledge of a word. Multiple encounters over time are called for if the goal is more than a temporary surface-level understanding and if new words are to become permanently and flexibly represented in students' vocabulary repertoires. In the two chapters that follow this one, the focus will be on what teachers can do after initial word introduction to promote rich and sustained knowledge. Here, our focus is how to initially present words in ways that help them take root in students' vocabularies.

Before we open the discussion of how to effectively initiate building students' understanding of word meanings, we consider for a moment the situations in which words are likely to be introduced in the classroom. The most common is before a text is read. The reasoning behind this is to make unfamiliar words available for students when they encounter them as they read. If students are most often reading text independently, introducing word meanings that are important to comprehension before reading is the reasonable choice. Certainly this makes sense in contrast to waiting until after reading to introduce the words.

PROVIDING INITIAL WORD MEANING INFORMATION THROUGH DEFINITIONS

If one asks teachers how they first introduce a word, there is a high probability that *definition* will be in their responses. Indeed, definitions are synonymous with vocabulary instruction in many classrooms. How-

ever, the reality is that definitions are not an effective vehicle for learning word meanings. Studies that provided dictionary definitions to students and asked students to create sentences with the words or answers to brief questions about the words revealed that—

- Sixty-three percent of the students' sentences were judged to be "odd" (Miller & Gildea, 1985).
- Sixty percent of students' responses were unacceptable (McKeown, 1991, 1993).
- Students frequently interpreted one or two words from a definition as the entire meaning (Scott & Nagy, 1989).

Problems with Dictionary Definitions

To understand why dictionary definitions are so often unhelpful, it can be useful to know a bit about how definitions end up in the form they do. Formalized definitional practice can be traced to the time of Samuel Johnson's mid-18th-century *Dictionary of the English Language*. The traditional form of definitions is based on describing a word by first identifying the class to which something belongs and then indicating how it differs from other members of the class. A classic example is *bachelor* defined as "a man who is *unmarried*."

The most overriding consideration for definitional format, however, is that definitions in dictionaries must be concise because of space restrictions. Lexicographers, those who develop dictionaries, have called this constraint "horrendous." Indeed, one lexicographer made the point that "almost every defining characteristic common to dictionaries can be traced to the need to conserve space" (Landau, 1984, p. 140), and another has said that dictionary definitions have led to "some remarkable convolutions in dictionary prose style" (Hanks, 1987, p. 120).

So there is nothing "official" or "scientific" about the form in which definitions appear. For this reason, combined with the fact that definitions are not particularly helpful for student learning, we prefer to introduce new vocabulary by explaining a word's meaning rather than providing a definition for the word.

When we examined definitions by putting ourselves in the place of a young learner trying to make sense of the information, we came up

with four characteristic features of definitions that get in the way of understanding word meaning.

The first we called **weak differentiation**, which means that the definition does not differentiate how the target word is different from other similar words—how it is a specific case of a more general idea. For example, consider *conspicuous* defined in a junior dictionary as “easily seen.” This definition weakly differentiates *conspicuous* from the general domain of “visible.” After all, unless it is dark or one has poor vision, nearly everything is easily seen. Something conspicuous is not just easy to see but rather pops out at you because of its size or color or inappropriateness to a situation.

Second problem of dictionary definitions is that they are often stated in such **vague language** that they provide little information. As an example, consider *typical* defined as “being a type.” At best, a learner might manage to ask, “A type of what?” It is unlikely that a young student would make enough sense of the definition to develop much, if any, idea of what *typical* means.

A third problem of definitions is that there may be a **more likely interpretation** of meaning than the one intended. This can happen when a definition uses familiar words in unfamiliar ways. For example, consider the definition for *devious*: “straying from the right course; not straight-forward.” The idea of straying from a course is likely to be interpreted in a concrete, physical way. A young learner may conclude that *devious* has to do with crooked walking or getting lost.

The fourth problematic characteristic is that some definitions give **multiple pieces of information** but offer no guidance in how they should be integrated. For example, consider the definition for *exotic*: “foreign; strange; not native.” A learner might wonder what relationship to draw among these parts. Is something exotic if it is strange but not foreign?—Or only if it is both foreign and strange? The concept for *exotic* that needs to be captured is that when something is exotic it may be strange or unusual or special *because* it comes from a distant place.

The problematic features of dictionary definitions as exemplified by those provided above, the evidence that young students do not learn effectively from dictionary definitions, and the complaints of lexicographers themselves all point to a need for those of us who are engaged in teaching to do better than dictionaries may do when presenting word-meaning information. Toward this goal, we present three constructs for

developing *initial* word-meaning information: student-friendly explanations of words, instructional contexts, and opportunities for students to interact with word meanings in ways that oblige them to think about what a word means.

• You Try It •

Select a few words that are unfamiliar to your students, and ask them to look up the words in a classroom dictionary and read the definitions. Then, ask students to talk about what they think the definition means. What was most helpful to them in understanding the definition? What was confusing?

Developing Student-Friendly Explanations

Giving a definition of a word—even for words we know well—is not an easy task. Toward developing student-friendly explanations, two basic principles should be followed: (1) Characterize the word and how it is typically used. (2) Explain the meaning in everyday language.

Characterize the Word

For an explanation to be optimally helpful, it should be as particular as possible. It should pinpoint a word’s meaning by explaining its typical use. Ask yourself, “When do I use *this word* particularly?” Also, “Why do we have such a word?” In some cases, an explanation that pinpoints a word’s meaning may not capture all possible applications of that word. But explanations that attempt to be all-inclusive sacrifice explanatory strength. It is preferable to start students off with a strong focused concept of what a word means rather than draw attention to multiple senses of meaning. Rather than dealing with too much information at the outset, language users can more readily extend a concept as their use of it grows.

As an exercise in characterization, consider the word *tamper*. What comes to mind when you think of that word? Possibly that if you tamper with something it doesn’t work any more; also, that tampering is often done secretly to try to trick or harm someone. But consider a definition for *tamper* taken from a dictionary: “to interfere in a secret or incorrect

way.” This definition would seem to include simply meddling in someone else’s affairs as a busybody. It lacks the sense of messing up something in a possibly sinister way. A more student-friendly explanation, crafted to highlight the notion that tampering with something damages it, might be “to change something secretly so that it does not work properly or becomes harmful.”

Explain Meanings in Everyday Language

Developing effective word explanations for students calls for taking care to explain the concept in language that is readily accessible so students can understand the concept with ease. Definitions such as “one associated with another” are more puzzling than helpful. What word comes to mind when you read that definition? (The word is *ally*!)

To move the definition of *ally* into accessible language, think of how to communicate the concept of “association” in student-friendly terms. Perhaps something like “somebody who does things with you” or “somebody you hang around with.” Now, consider whether that captures the characteristic meaning of *ally*: It seems to miss the role of an ally as helping in some common cause. Picking up on that aspect, we might come up with a definition such as “someone who helps you in what you are trying to do, especially when there are other people who are against you.”

Another aspect of creating an explanation with an eye toward accessible language is developing it in such a way that students will attend to the whole explanation. This is to ensure that some words within an explanation do not take on unintended emphasis and lead students to choose just part of the explanation as the entire meaning. For instance, explaining *meticulous* as “extremely or excessively careful about small details” gives prominence to the word *careful*. Using the most obvious sense of *careful*, students could interpret the word as relating to being cautious about danger. Adding *neat* might help students understand the appropriate sense of *careful*. A student-friendly form of the definition might then be given as “being very neat and careful about small details.”

Consider a few more words and how we might work our way from dictionary definitions to student-friendly explanations.

covert: kept from sight; secret; hidden

What are students likely to make of this definition? The clearest part, for students, would seem to be the word *secret*. So, students might well interpret the word as a synonym for *secret* without even stopping to realize that the word is an adjective rather than a noun. Beyond this possible misinterpretation, the definition sounds as if it applies to something or someone that you want to hide. This is at odds with the way *covert* is most often used—to describe an action done in a secretive way. To define *covert* as “**describes something that is done in a hidden or secret way**” makes it much clearer to students how the word is to be applied.

disrupt: break up; split

This could easily be interpreted as physical breaking, as in “We disrupted the candy bar so we could all share it.” What’s the nature of *disrupt* that needs to be captured? It would seem to be that disrupting is like rudely stopping something that’s going on, or causing a problem that makes some activity cease. Using these ideas might lead to the student-friendly explanation: “**to cause difficulties that stop something from continuing easily or peacefully.**”

illusion: appearance or feeling that misleads because it is not real

This is a good example of a vague definition. An “appearance that misleads” is rather hard to make sense of. Might it be something that looks good but isn’t—like a stale piece of cake? Or considering “feeling”—how does a feeling mislead? How is a feeling not real? The core of *illusion* is something that looks real but isn’t, or appears to be something but isn’t there at all. Those ideas could be put together in a definition such as “**something that looks like one thing but is really something else or is not there at all.**”

improvise: to make, invent, or arrange with whatever is on hand

This definition seems to lack a key component of improvisation, the idea that you use whatever is on hand *because* you don’t have exactly what’s called for. Also, the “make, invent, or arrange” trio makes the whole concept a bit vague. A definition that better characterizes *improvise* and is more concrete and accessible might be

“to make something you need by using whatever is available at the moment.”

morbid: not healthy or normal

This definition really pushes the limits of failing to characterize a word! Something morbid is well beyond not healthy. Imagine a student telling his mother, “I think I need to stay home from school today—I’m feeling morbid!” The definition has to be explicit about the connection to death or gruesome thoughts. Perhaps a more student-friendly explanation is “showing a great interest in horrible, gruesome details, especially about death.”

Note that all the above student-friendly explanations are quite a bit longer than their dictionary counterparts. The brevity of many dictionary definitions leaves too much assumed, and young learners often make incorrect assumptions or are unable to put the ideas together at all. Fuller, more explicit language is needed to promote students’ development of word meaning. As teachers, we do not have the constraints imposed on lexicographers, so we can provide the kinds of explanations that will be most helpful to students.

If you review the student-friendly explanations above, you will also notice that they often include words such as *something*, *someone*, or *describes*. These terms anchor the meaning for students so they can begin to get an idea of how to use the word.

• You Try It •

You might find it useful to try your hand at creating some student-friendly explanations.

1. Select some words that your students are currently learning.
2. Look up the definitions for the words provided in a dictionary or glossary.
3. Think about the definitions from a young learner’s point of view.
 - What difficulties might the definitions pose to such a learner? (Refer to pages 33 and 34 for a discussion of potential definition difficulties.)

- How might you characterize the words so that their meanings are specific?
 - What everyday language might you use to craft explanations?
4. Create student-friendly explanations for the words you selected. Try to include the words *something*, *someone*, or *describes* in your explanations.
 5. Share the explanations you created with your students. Ask them to compare your explanations with the definitions provided in a dictionary or glossary.

PROVIDING MEANING INFORMATION THROUGH INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXTS

Another common way to convey word-meaning information is through instructional contexts. In contrast to natural contexts, which were discussed in Chapter 1, instructional contexts refer to contexts that have been developed with the intention of providing strong clues to a word’s meaning. To understand how different the two types of context are, consider the natural context in which the word *grudgingly* appeared in Chapter 1, contrasted with an instructional context.

“Every step she takes is so perfect and graceful,” Ginny said *grudgingly*, as she watched Sandra dance.

The use of *grudgingly* makes sense—it communicates well—if you know the meaning of the word. However, the natural context is misleading for readers who do not know the meaning because the situation described might lead such readers to think that *grudgingly* refers to a positive feeling such as admiration. In contrast to the misleading natural context in which *grudgingly* was found, one could develop an instructional context in which the meaning elements of *grudgingly* are made clear and from which its meaning is more easily derived. For example:

Ginny hated the way Sandra always danced so beautifully. “No matter how much I practice, I never do it as well. Every step Sandra takes is so perfect and graceful,” Ginny said *grudgingly*.

Helping students derive word meaning from natural contexts will be discussed fully in Chapter 6. Here, we focus on instructional contexts, which are developed by teachers and available in teacher guides for textbooks.

Even though instructional contexts are designed to make word meaning transparent, it is not enough to simply make an instructional context available to students. In one way or another, a definition or explanation of the target word needs to be developed. And the reasoning behind deriving a meaning for the target word needs to be made public for students. Mere exposure to an instructional context leaves introduction of word meaning incomplete. There is no guarantee that students will come to a clear or correct conclusion about a word's meaning. Making word-meaning information public ensures that all students will begin with a clear, explicit concept of the word. And making public how word meaning was derived from the context allows students to build a stronger connection between the word and its meaning.

For example, if a student derives the meaning of *grudgingly* and provides an adequate definition, perhaps "saying something that you really don't like saying," the teacher needs to probe that student's thinking in ways that require the students to explain the parts that helped him or her figure out that Ginny really didn't want to say what she said. So, let's go back into Ms. T's class and see what such an exchange might be like:

Ms. T: Tell us how you figured out that Ginny said it *grudgingly* because it was something she didn't like saying.

TONIA: Well, she didn't like that Sandra always danced so good.

Ms. T: She didn't? Why not?

TONIA: Because *she* didn't.

LEE: And Ginny practiced a lot, and still didn't.

ZOE: So she was jealous, probably.

Ms. T: *Jealous* is a good word to use here. So, Ginny said Sandra danced well, but she said it *grudgingly*. She really didn't want to admit that Sandra was such a good dancer.

Explaining their reasoning may be quite difficult for students. Therefore, it is a good idea to start out by having the teacher provide

some models for deriving meaning from instructional contexts. As an example, consider the following:

The rider couldn't control the *obstinate* horse. She was getting angry that this horse acted this way often.

Modeling how one might derive the meaning for *obstinate* could go something like this:

Obstinate must mean something that a horse could be, and it has to be something that would make a horse hard to control. Maybe scared, a horse could be scared, and because he was scared, he might act up and be hard to control. But it says the horse acted this way often and that the rider was angry about it. I don't think a rider would be angry at a scared horse. *Obstinate* must be a way a horse acts that riders don't like. It could mean stubborn, because horses can get stubborn and some horses can get stubborn often. When they do, it's hard for a rider to get them to do what she wants.

Such modeling can be useful, but teachers should use it sparingly because it puts students in the passive role of overhearing the teacher thinking aloud. However, such modeling is appropriate when students are being introduced to the idea of deriving meaning from context and when a complicated and subtle context is being explored. It is important, however, to emphasize that students should be made part of the deriving-meaning process as soon as possible, queried along the way as meaning elements are derived from a context.

The following examples show how one might scaffold students' attempts to derive word meanings from instructional contexts:

The deer would be able to eat all they wanted in the meadow, for there was an *abundance* of grass.

- Why would the deer be able to eat all they wanted?
- How much grass must be in the meadow?
- So, what do you think *abundance* means?

The train ride had been long, and I was tired of looking out the window. So I decided to *eavesdrop* on what two of the passengers sit-

ting behind me were saying. I knew what they were saying was none of my business, but it might be interesting, so I tried to listen.

- What is this person up to? What told you that?
- What's this about it was none of his business?
- So, *eavesdrop* means what kind of listening?

"Please don't eat the flowers, sir," said the waiter. "I don't think they are *edible*! They might make you sick!"

- What is the waiter telling the man about the flowers?
- If eating them might make you sick, what does that tell you?
- So, if you shouldn't eat things that are not edible, what does *edible* mean?

• You Try It •

You might find it useful to try your hand at creating some instructional contexts for words that you want your students to learn. Develop some sentences about each target word, as well as some questions to help students make use of the information to derive its meaning.

PROVIDING MEANINGS AS WORDS ARE ENCOUNTERED

The assumption to this point has been that words are introduced before a text is read, and certainly if students are most often reading text independently, introducing word meanings that are important to comprehension before reading is the reasonable choice. This makes sense in contrast to waiting until after reading to introduce the words. But if the word is likely to affect comprehension of the story, then the most effective place to introduce word meaning may be at the moment the word is met in the text. The meaning can then be integrated into the context of use immediately, which provides strong support for comprehension. In this way, students are not called upon to put comprehension on hold as they access their memories for the word's meaning. Another important consideration is that, even if students have been introduced to a word's meaning before reading, their memory for a newly introduced word

meaning may still be rather tentative, making it difficult to bring that meaning into the text.

At times when a text is read aloud in class, introducing the meanings of words as they are encountered during reading can be done simply and briefly by giving a quick explanation of the word or what it means within the context. For example, consider the following context from *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976, p. 4): "Christopher-John and Stacey were not too pleased about the clothing or school either. Only Little Man, just beginning his school career, found the prospects of both intriguing." At this point, a teacher could simply say, "*Intriguing* means Little Man was pretty interested in and excited about school."

Another approach to dealing with word meanings as text is read might be to ask students for the meaning of a potentially unfamiliar word that is encountered, bringing them into the deriving-meaning process as described in the previous section. However, it is important to provide guidance if students do not quickly know the word's meaning. Otherwise, it can lead to students making guesses, many of which may be incorrect. That can both take attention to the text offtrack as well as confuse students as to the actual meaning of the word.

Here, the point is teacher guidance. Certainly, allow students to figure out clues to a word's meaning from contexts, but don't let them stray too far before stepping in, either to give the meaning or to point out the relevant clues or how to interpret them. For example, consider the following exchange around a context from Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* (1972, p. 88):

Through the glass floor of the Elevator, Charlie caught a quick glimpse of the huge red roof and the tall chimneys of the giant factory. They were plunging straight down onto it.

Ms. T: What do you think *glimpse* means?

JEN: Like a piece of something.

Ms. T: A piece of something?

JEN: Yeah. I think a piece of the roof or the chimney came in and hit him.

Ms. T: Oh, I see how you could get that idea. But *glimpse* means "a quick look at something, kind of a peek." So, he was just getting a quick look at the roof and chimney as the Elevator fell.

Note how Ms. T turns back Jen's original surmise about the word's meaning, giving Jen an opportunity to explain where that came from. That gives Ms. T an understanding of how Jen reached that conclusion. So, Ms. T is able to acknowledge Jen's thinking while explaining how the actual meaning of glimpse fits the context.

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN DEALING WITH WORD MEANINGS

Providing student-friendly explanations or scaffolding students as they derive word meanings from instructional contexts is only part of what it takes to help students establish an initial understanding of what a word means. The other part is to ensure that students actually deal with the meanings right away. There are numerous short and lively activities that can require students to process meanings. We next provide several that we have found to be engaging for students. The activities below come from the vocabulary research studies that we engaged in and which we noted in Chapter 1.

Word Associations

After having presented explanations for *accomplice*, *virtuoso*, *philanthropist*, and *novice*, we asked students to associate one of their new words with a presented word or phrase, such as the following:

- Which word goes with crook? (*accomplice*)
- Which word goes with "gift to build a new hospital"? (*philanthropist*)
- Which word goes with piano? (*virtuoso*)
- Which word goes with kindergartner? (*novice*)

In each case, students were then asked *why* they decided on the connection they had made. Associating a known word with a newly learned word reinforces even further the meaning of the word. Note that the associations are not synonyms; rather, the student must develop a relationship. For example, in the case of associations between *crook* and *accomplice*, one student might say that an accomplice helps a crook, another

might say that an accomplice is learning to be a crook, and yet another might suggest that crooks want accomplices to help them in their wrongdoings. Having students explain their reasoning is an essential component of the kind of instruction that requires learners to process information—directly deal with information by considering and mentally manipulating it.

Have You Ever . . . ?

This activity helps students associate newly learned words with contexts and activities from their own experience. Thus, it helps students understand that they have a place for the word in their vocabularies. In the activity, students are asked to "Describe a time when you might *urge* someone, *commend* someone, *banter* with someone."

Applause, Applause!

For this activity, students are asked to clap in order to indicate how much they would like (not at all, a little bit, a lot) to be described by the target words: *frank*, *impish*, *vain*, *stern*. And, as always, *why* they would feel that way.

Idea Completions

In contrast to the traditional "write a sentence using the new word," which can result in meaningless use (e.g., "I saw a virtuoso."), we provided students with sentence stems that required them to integrate a word's meaning into a context in order to explain a situation. For example:

The audience asked the virtuoso to play another piece of music because . . .

The skiing teacher said Maria was a novice on the ski slopes because . . .

There are many variations on activities that get students actively engaged with word meanings. They can be as simple as asking questions such as the following about newly introduced words:

When might you . . . ?
How might you . . . ?
Why might you . . . ?

The key to effective activities is that they require students to attend to a word's meaning in order to apply it meaningfully to an example situation.

IN SUMMARY

In introducing words, here are some things to keep in mind:

- Make word meanings explicit and clear. Develop student-friendly explanations or create instructional contexts for discussing word meanings.
- Get students actively involved with thinking about and using the meanings right away.

Full understanding and spontaneous, appropriate use of new words develops gradually, but a strong start is essential to allowing those processes to occur.

▪ *Your Turn* ▪

We invite you to use what you have learned in this chapter to develop some ways to introduce words you will teach.

1. Select words from a text that your students will be reading.
2. Create a student-friendly explanation for each word by—
 - Thinking about what specific elements make the word different from other words.
 - Using everyday language.
3. Develop instructional contexts for some words. That is, write sentences and develop questions that will support students in deriving the meaning of those words.
4. Create some activities that will engage students in dealing with the word's meaning.